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ABSTRACT

The 75th anniversary of a city honored among other things for its role in the revival of the Hebrew language is an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves of the complex effects of language policy on education. In choosing to establish Hebrew as its standard language, Israel was working to proclaim both present and historical unity. The rapidity with which the language spread, the comparative ease with which large numbers of migrants came to use it, the skill with which it was developed for new domains of modern life, should not be permitted, however, to obscure one of the costs. In Israel, as in much of the modern world, children come to school speaking a language or a dialect different from the one valued by the school system. Failure to recognize this means that many children, whether their home language is different from the standard or a stigmatized variant of it, face a barrier to their education. Educational linguistics, a field that is well developed in Israel, provides a means of studying this problem and of working to provide equal educational opportunity for all students in a multilingual society. (Author/RDN)

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OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION IN A MULTILINGUAL WORLD

by

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For the Symposium on Education marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the foundin of the City of Tel-Aviv

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION IN A MULTILINGUAL WORLD

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Abstract The seventy-fifth anniversary of a city honoured among other things for its role in the revival of the Hebrew language is an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves of the complex effects of language policy on education. In choosing to establish Hebrew as its standard language, Israel was working to proclaim both present and historical unity. The rapidity with which the language spread, the comparative ease with which large numbers of migrants came to use it, the skill with which it was developed for new domains of modern life, should not however be permitted to obscure one of the costs. In Israel, as in much of the modern world, children come to school speaking a language or a variety of language that is different from the one valued by the school system. Failure to recognize this means that many children, whether their home language is different from the standard or a stigmatized variant of it, face a language barrier to their education. Educational linguistics, a field that is well developed in Israel, provides a means of studying this problem and working to provide equal educational opportunity for all students in a multilingual society.

In celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the city of Tel Aviv, we cannot avoid thinking of the enormous recent growth of cities and urban populations throughout the world over the last few decades. In 1950, demographers tell us, there were only seven urban centers with more than 5 million population; now there are thirty-four, and by the year 2025, there could be over 90, 80 of them in emerging nations. It is appropriate therefore to take this opportunity to focus on one seemingly small but in fact critical aspect of this process, the educational consequence of the the linguistic patterning of large modern urban developments.

Look at the kind of changes that are occurring. London was

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once known as the center from which standard English spread: now, it is estimated that fewer than 20% of the children coming to school there do so with any control over standard English. Toronto and Melbourne were not so many years ago considered the acme of homogeneity and monolingualism: now each is a vibrant example of complex multilingualism. and Melbourne boasts of being the largest Maltese speaking city in the world. and one of the largest for Greek. Italian and several other languages. As Dr Love could explain to us. when Chicago set out to start dealing with the problems of linguistic minorities. it developed a questionnaire that named 98 languages. using the 99th code for any others (and you may be sure there were others). But this complexity should not surprise: in a sociolinguistic survey we have been carrying out within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem we have so far found speakers of over thirty different languages!

The first generalization that we can make then is that large cities tend to linguistic complexity. Cities are by their nature places where people from diverse backgrounds gather. bringing with them the language and culture and behavior of the multitude of places from which they come: the wider the sources of origin, the more complex the current pattern is likely to be. A second force for maintaining diversity is within the city itself: its very complexity requires that its residents live in separate neighborhoods. and the fact that so many of its inhabitants come from different backgrounds makes it natural that in their first settlement in the city at least they should seek to live in a neighborhood with others with similar background and language.

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Even without these driving forces for diversity, the complexity of occupational roles, the necessity for specialization, and the consequent development of socially and economic distinct groups each tending to spend its non-working life among others like it lead naturally to the development of socially distinct language variaties as well as socially distinct ways of behavior. Finally, the differential need for education and for control of the educationally-valued variety of language means that the population of a city is divided in the values it attaches to the autonomous style of verbalization associated with school.

These four dimensions work individually and in combination to produce a potential language barrier to education for sections of the population: unless this barrier can be overcome, there can be no equality of opportunity or equity in education, and excellence is likely to restricted to an elite and denied to the majority. Let me first look at each of the kinds of linguistic difference that we find in cities, and note the special problems it poses to those who are reponsible for education.

THE BARRIER OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

The first kind of difference is the simplest to recognize, for it is marked by the fact that each variety is a distinct language, with a recognized name. Thus, it is easy to recognize that cities like Brussels and Montreal will need to allow for two different languages in their educational program, for each city is known to be bilingual with distinct populations using the two languages. Similarly, a city with a large number of immigrants will recognize that the immigrant children have a potential

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linguistic problem. When the growing school system of the new Yishuv decided to use Hebrew as the language of instruction, it recognized that it was doing this for many children whose learning of the language would start in school; and as Israel has worked to assimilate its huge numbers of immigrant, the need to teach Hebrew has been in the forefront of attention.

Knowing that the problem is there is not enough, but it is a good starting point, as the sad fate of many children treated as mentally retarded because they do not speak the language of the school attests. There are various approaches, ranging from the malign neglect of submersion programs through the full care of maintenance bilingual programs. All assume as a primary goal the learning of the language (or occasionally, languages) selected by the school system as the medium of teaching.

How should this school-selected language be characterized? It is marked generally by certain distinctive features, which even if they do not actually exist, are inevitably assumed to be present. First, it has all the properties of what sociolinguists characterize as a standard language: fundamental is a widespread belief that there exists a "standard" or "correct" version of the language, hopefully the version recorded in the dictionaries and grammar books used by the school, and theoretically reflecting the usage of the best writers and thinkers of the present and past. I say hopefully and theoretically, for as anyone who has studied normativism will know, it is rare that there will be agreement even among the experts as to what constitutes this standard variety. It is not uncommon that a situation develops as it has with modern Hebrew, where while the general public

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agrees with the self-proclaimed purists that there is a correct grammar, no one can show where or what it is: rather, there are a large number of idiosyncratically decreed shibboleths. A second critical feature of a school language is that, like a standard language, it is believed to be independent, autonomous, not a modified version dependent on some other language: it is not in other words a dialect. This reminds one of the old definition of a language as a dialect with an army and a flag behind it. As long as the immigrants in South Africa thought they were speaking a dialect of Dutch, they were restrained from teaching their own variety: once they knew they spoke Afrikaans, they could proclaim its value as a school language. Similar difficulties face many new nations in their choice of a language for school. Of course a school system may choose to use a language from elsewhere, but it is reluctant to teach what it considers a dialect: witness the resistance to the English varieties in foreign education.

Thirdly, a school language, like a standard language, has historicity: a sense that it is associated with some Great Tradition, whether national or religious or intellectual: it is believed, in other words, to be the language of a culture of major importance, although the culture need not be the one that is most widespread among the population from whom the school derives it pupils.

The fourth characterisrtic of a standard language is that of vitality, the existence of native speakers, of people who grow up speaking it and learn it from their parents. In fact, this is

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not usually the case with school languages: it is indeed my argument in this paper that such a state of affairs is quite rare, that it is the exceptional case for a child to come to school having learned at home the specific language, regional and class variety, and kind of language that the school favors.

THE BARRIER OF DIFFERENT DIALECTS

When the language of home and school are clearly distinct, as when new immigrants to Israel come to schools that teach in Hebrew, the problem is potentially obvious. But it is much less clear in the second kind of situation, when the language of the home is considered to be a dialect of the standard language used in school. Dialects are generally reflections of geographical differences, but they may also mark religious, ethnic or social variety. I will consider this last kind of variety separately, and concentrate for the moment on the first set. By its nature, the city gathers into it people from various parts of a country; when they arrive they bring with them a marked way of speaking that can cause at least two kinds of problem. The first arises out of actual differences between the varieties: real phonological differences, different lexical items, different semantic systems, and even more, different pragmatic rules, can all lead to real misunderstandings. But in fact the major redundancies built into natural language mean that such misunderstanding is usually no more than a source of momentary confusion and has it main function in jokes. More serious are the potential attitudinal effects of dialect differences, where stereotypes determine treatment of people from certain parts of the country.

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A particularly challenging situation is set up where there is the kind of dialect situation that Ferguson called diglossia: the existence side by side of two related versions of a language, one not usually spoken natively but accepted for public and intellectual functions, and the other used in most daily life activities. The classic case of this is Arabic, where local varieties (however educated and prestigious their speakers) all take a second place to the Classical language required to be used for higher functions including writing. A good way to appreciate this is to look at the face of a speaker of Arabic who is asked to write down a sentence he has used in normal spoken Arabic. Typically, these diglossic situations lead to an educational pattern in which only the H or classical variety is taught in school, although the teaching naturally takes place in the L or local dialect.

THE BARRIER OF SOCIAL CLASS DIALECTS

The third kind of difference is similar to the second, for social dialects function much like regional ones: they create not so much linguistic misunderstanding as social judgments. Studies in the US and in Europe have shown us the existence of these socially distinct varieties within cities. We see that not only do people tend to talk like the members if their social class, but that in many situations they tend to talk like the people with whom they deal: thus one classic study has shown that department store staff used language that reflected the social class of their customers and another has documented a case of a travel agent whose pronunciation varies according to the

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customer.

What is most critical in this phenomenon is the attribution of value to social variety: in spite of the structural linguist's rather naive claim that all languages are equal, it is generally the case that all varieties are differentially valued. Bell in a recent paper has elegantly demonstrated that individual stylistic variation is a reflex of community social variation, proposing that stylistic variation can be characterized as audience design: a speaker changes his way of speaking according to a present (or absent but significant) audience, in accordance with the values he places on converging with or diverging from this audience. From the educator's point of view, the critical issue is once again one of attitude: the self fulfilling prophecy of those who will categorise students by their accents as bright or stupid.

THE BARRIER OF PREFERRED STYLE OF VERBALIZATION

The fourth dimension of difference is one that is less easy to characterize, for it does not seem to have the clear linguistic marks of the variety differences I have been talking about so far: it does not show up in phonology or grammar or even pragmatics, but rather in the highest level of discourse. I am referring to a culturally and socially determined preference for what I am most comfortable calling, in Kay's terms, autonomous verbalization. It is a phenomenon that has been most deeply and controversially studied by Basil Bernstein, who, I am sure would be the first to admit, shares in difficulties of naming the phenomenon. Let me try to explain the issue in my own words.

Language starts, as Elizabeth Bates has pointed out,

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unspecialized as to channel: young children start off using physical gestures and oral signals equally, but are usually encouraged to develop their verbal rather than their gestural skills for the main task of communication. Spoken language continues however to make considerable use of non-verbal means, whether in gesture or intonation. Because language is a social phenomenon, the efficiency of communication depends on what is shared between speaker and listener. One obvious thing that is shared is the grammar and the lexicon. A second is the pragmatic system, rules for language use which help explain how we understand that what looks like a statement like "The salt is at your end of the table." is a request. A third is a physical context. A fourth is a shared knowledge of the world. Without any of these, communication is difficult. Conversely, the more that is shared, the simpler communication is.

The phenomenon that Bernstein has drawn to our attention is a socially valued (and, as he has argued, transmitted) tendency to prefer communicatioon with maximum or minimum extra-linguistic support, ranging along a continuum from a breakfast table grunt asking a child to pass the butter to let us say a history book. Consider the differences on the criteria I have mentioned: because the father has just taken a piece of toast and is pointing with his knife at the butter plate (physical context including gesture, and shared knowledge of the fact that one puts butter on the toast), the verbal load can be minimal. The historian on the other hand is writing, without shared physical context, for strangers whose general knowledge he will find

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difficult to guess at. Thus, he deliberately cultivates a style which puts maximum emphasis on verbal communication.

What Bernstein has pointed out to us is the relationship of social facts to this pattern: he has further demonstrated that there are social structures that favor each kind of verbalization, producing in certain cases that he has studied a social class associated differentiation in verbal style. Further, he has pointed out that modern Westernized education with its emphasis on reading and writing is heavily biassed towards autonomous verbalization, producing thus particular problems for children from certain classes.

I do not have time in this short paper to do justice to this fascinating idea, nor to consider its basic complexity. That it is oversimplified does not detract from its importance, nor does the fact that it needs to be balanced and refined by considering the implications of other kinds of literacy and education than the general modern Western tradition (I think of the very different model inherent in Yeshiva learning, based on the mediated literacy of traditional Judaism). What is important for us is that there will commonly exist a major gap between the style of verbalization encouraged by the home and that demanded by the school, adding one more to the language barriers faced by children coming to school.

MISDIAGNOSING LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

There are then these four potential language barriers that can face children coming to school, and that will most commonly block the access to equal education for children in the growing cities of the world: first, that their language is not the same

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as the language of the school; second, that their regional or religious or ethnic dialect is not that of the school; third, that their social dialect is different from that favored by the school; and fourth, that their socially or culturally determined preference for verbal style is different from that cultivated by the school. Even more seriously, the existence of these four separate causes, each with potentially different treatments, can be confounded and lead to an early mislabelling of pupils as uneducable. For it is one of the special features of modern mass education that it encourages the belief that it has the last word not just on how to do things but on what should be done: that it believes that only the language it wants to teach exists; that it acts as though only its style of verbalization is possible.

For we must distinguish between what I would characterize as a healthy additive approach to language education and a damaging replacive approach. We have ample evidence of the possibiltities and value of additive approaches: I mention the successful French immersion programs for anglophone Canadians, the traditional teaching of Loshn Koydesh to Yiddish speakers in Eastern European communities, the addition of High German to the linguistic repertoire of Swiss Germans or of English to the linguistic repertoire of Scandinavians. But replacive language teaching, an approach that assumes there is something wrong with the language brought to school by the child, is a much different matter. Learning a second language is not easy at the best of times, for it requires not just time and effort but a willingness

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to be open to completely new ways of thinking about and even perceiving things that are intimately tied up with one's personality: being forced to learn a second language that it intended to replace one's first language is a direct assault on identity.

The solution to the problems set up by the language barriers to education is far from easy, for it involves dealing with some of the most basic issues in school and in the wider society it serves. For by its nature, language is a core factor in any education, for education depends on communication and verbal coding of human knowledge. Nor can dealing with language issues alone solve social problems. But until the existence of the language barriers to education have been recognized and their working carefully analyzed, there is no chance of successful steps to overcome the barriers and provide equal educational opportunities for all.

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